Portraying Portraits
*The Intersectionality of Self, Art, and the Lacanian Gaze in the Nahziryah Monastic Community*

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Introduction

Who on Earth...Who in the world...are the Purple People? These two questions serve as the title of the main book outlining the belief system of the Nahziryah Monastic Community (NMC). These interrogatives also act as the driving force behind the materialization of this essay. Both authors are intrigued by this group’s fluid ritualistic activities and convoluted belief system, particularly their use of material culture to articulate ideas about beingness and selfhood. After exhaustive rounds of investigation, these same authors, much like the group that they studied, began to ask specific questions. Why have groups like the Nahziryah Monastic Community received little scholarly treatment in African American religious studies? More importantly, how can an exploration of the NMC’s use of material culture to articulate a complex conception of selfhood premised on the dissolution of social categories like race further diversify African American religion?

This essay considers such questions in that it explores this group’s usage of art to convey an esoteric understanding of selfhood. Specifically, self-portraits act as objects of reflexivityaffording members and non-members the ability to experience an expansion of consciousness i.e. self-progression. The four sections of this chapter seek to unpack this aesthetic reflexivity in the manifestation of self as conceived among the “Purple People.” The first section offers a historical narrative of the Nahziryah Monastic Community. The second section unpacks this group’s convoluted conception of self—a notion of self premised on intersectionality between consciousness, physical/psychical differentiation and mergence. The third section employs Lacanian notions of gazing and mirroring to provide a brief examination of the occurrence of intricate encounters occurring between NMC conceptions of self, self portraits, and individuals via the creation of a “reciprocated gaze.” This gaze is defined as an interpretative view created through the interaction of the object (e.g., self portrait) and individual to apprehend a non-differentiated notion of selfhood. The last section discusses the major implications of this chapter on
Western Esotericism in particular and African American religious studies in general.

**History and Belief System of the Nahziryah Monastic Community**

The historical trajectory of the Nahziryah Monastic Community (NMC) begins with a single figure, Reverend Baba Nazirmoreh K.B. Kedem (All Blessings and Respect Due). Reverend Nazirmoreh (ABRD), according to the order's newsletter *The Purple Veil*, is the direct descendent of a patrilineal line of mystics: both his father and grandfather were masters of esoteric knowledge. Reverend Nazirmoreh's (ABRD) patrilinear inheritance remains latent until early adulthood, when at that time he happens upon a small book while rummaging through the basement of an old house. The book, more specifically the book's title, acts as a projection screen displaying the purposes of both his past lives and present life. This basement experience confirms for Reverend Nazirmoreh (ABRD) the presence of a hereditarily transmitted spiritual gift. The revelation, furthermore, catapults him onto an esoteric path. He immediately enters intense training in the teachings of the “Ancient Ones,” which results in his initiation. (*The Purple Veil* 1994) Interestingly enough, the biographical account offered by the NMC does not list either the location of this training or the name of the “high adept” who initiates Reverend Nazirmoreh (ABRD), but despite this, his establishment of the NMC as a monastic order in 1970 as a result of his initiation has been documented (*The Drama* 2005, 10–11). Reverend Nazirmoreh (ABRD), in addition to organizing the NMC, simultaneously forms the Nazir Order of the Purple Veil—the initiated order of the NMC whose members are distinguished by the wearing of purple garments (to be discussed later in this section). Thus, from the very beginning, he puts into place a porous organizational structure that would allow for varying degrees of membership and initiation in the NMC. The maturation of this structure occurs when the NMC relocates to Louisiana.

In 1985, Reverend Nazirmoreh (ABRD) moves the NMC from an undisclosed “wilderness” location to the urban terrain of New Orleans. While in the Crescent City, he expands the structural organization of the NMC by introducing three additional degrees of membership: (1) student-visitor, (2) helper-supporter, and (3) direct-student. These non-residential levels afford individuals the ability to take advantage of NMC’s resources without a commitment to the monastic way of life as practiced by residential members. Direct-student membership, unlike the first two, is the candidacy level, which precedes full time residential membership into the NMC. Equally important to these structural